

evoked popular protests, been denounced by publicists, and produced legislation and administrative action, long before the Reformation Parliament met. The floods were already running high, when the religious revolution swelled them with a torrent of bitter, if bracing, waters. Its effect on the social situation was twofold. Since it produced a sweeping redistribution of wealth, carried out by an unscrupulous minority using the weapons of violence, intimidation and fraud, and succeeded by an orgy of interested misgovernment on the part of its principal beneficiaries, it aggravated every problem, and gave a new turn to the screw which was squeezing peasant and craftsman. Since it released a torrent of writing, on questions not only of religion, but of social organization, it caused the criticisms passed on the changes of the past half-century to be brought to a head, in a sweeping indictment of the new economic forces, and an eloquent restatement of the traditional theory of social obligations. The centre of both was the land question. For it was agrarian plunder which principally stirred the cupidity of the age, and agrarian grievances which were the most important ground of social agitation.

The land question had been a serious matter for the greater part of a century before the Reformation. The first detailed account of enclosure had been written

by a chantry priest in Warwickshire, soon
after 1460.*
Then had come the legislation of 1489, 1515
and 1516,
Wolsey's Royal Commission in 1517, and
more legis-
lation in 1534-¹ Throughout, a steady
stream of
criticism had flowed from men of the
Renaissance, like
More, Starkey, and a host of less well-known
writers,
dismayed at the advance of social anarchy,
and sanguine
of the miracles to be performed by a Prince
who would
take counsel of philosophers.

If, however, the problem was acute long
before the
confiscation of the monastic estates, its
aggravation by
the fury of spoliation let loose by Henry and
Cromwell